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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on oversight in postsecondary education and the advancement of quality education are considered. It is suggested that state licensing agencies need adequate resources and support to function in the difficult times postsecondary education is facing, state governing and coordinating boards need to dilute their planning and coordinating functions with the administrative duties involved in oversight, and colleges and universities need to forego their exemptions from state oversight in order to restore strength to licensing laws. Additionally, it is suggested that accrediting agencies need to enlist the participation of the best representatives of their best member institutions. It is also important to elevate the level of interest and participation in the regional associations to the highest policy levels of institutions. It is noted that there is no simple solution to the quality problem. (SW)

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THE MANY-BODY PROBLEM OF QUALITY OVERSIGHT

A Paper by Keith Pailthorp for the Fourth Annual
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The theme of my remarks today is redundancy. As you all know, redundancy and duplication are anathema to educational planners, though we usually tack on the modifier "unnecessary" which immediately begs the question. Who would defend unnecessary duplication, or unnecessary presentations, of for that matter unnecessary kindness or fun or sex... Here the analogy, as they all must, breaks down.

Before I proceed with this pursuit of redundancy let me take care of a couple of housekeeping chores. Most of my experience in oversight was gathered in a state (Washington) which then had no state approval provision. Now you may think that is rather like learning to play tennis without a net, but in fact some of the hardest questions are asked during the process of developing and selling licensing legislation; questions that may not be seriously raised later after interests have become vested.

As a reformed physical scientist I am absolutely convinced that the questions we ask are more important than the answers we get. My favorite question arising out of my involvement in licensing legislation is, "Who is being injured?" The State, after all was being asked, if not to invest resources in oversight, at least to permit some growth in the size and complexity of government. My favorite answer to this

question goes like this. The seller of a bogus or substandard degree is certainly not the injured party. And one doesn't have to be a congenital cynic to infer from advertisements for such degrees that the buyer seldom gets less than he expected. Surely subsequent employers ought to look behind impressive-sounding credentials before hiring. No the injured party is not any of these individuals, but rather the diverse community of bona fide degree earners and earnest educators. To be archaic, the agrieved party is "the community of scholars", and the loss is no less a thing than the integrity of the educational enterprise. You can understand why I was never allowed to talk with legislators.

A second questions is whether the states ought to "take over" accreditation. To answer that question I must return to my main theme of redundancy.

The field of institutional oversight is an educational planner's Gettyburg; littered as it is with conscious and unconscious bodies from armies of witting and unwitting soldiers in this uncivil war. On the public side the body count can include 1202 Commissions, governing boards, Secretaries of State, Attorneys General, VA State Approving Agencies, the VA itself, the FTC, District Attorneys, County Clerks, Department of Motor Vehicles, and (I almost forgot) State Licensing Agencies. From the private side comes the regionals, the nationals, the professionals, the biblicals, and the mythicals.

To quote Butch Cassidy, President Emeritus of Wyoming Institute of Thievery (WIT), "Who are those guys, anyhow?" To which I would add, "And who needs them?" To which I would answer, "We all do". For in this field the greater hazard than duplication (excuse me, unnecessary) is chronic non-terminal Alfonse and Gaston Syndrome. Despite the impressive sum of the parts some holes have been left in the whole. I'll give you one guess what the educational planner's remedy for these "oversights in oversight" is.....Time's up. Give yourself twelve and one-half points and a complementary (sic) pass to the University of California system if you said, COORDINATION!

Let me reconnoiter. Despite the untidiness of this "many-body problem" there probably is room and roles for all of these actors. Having "mucked about" in a couple of these roles and appreciating the limitations of most of them, I am convinced that most of them are sufficiently necessary to warrant survival. But more than this, I would argue that only by subtituting concerted action for the Brownian Motion that now obtains can we escape the workings of Gresham's Law.

No self-respecting talk even remotely related to education can be concluded without at least one caveat. Here is this one's. The SHEEO people have drafted a letter of understanding with the regional associations which would appear to be a step in the direction of

concerted action, but watch the first step. It may be a long one. The details of the joint action proposed (e.g., status of agency representatives on evaluation teams) are not spelled out. But depending upon the ultimate disposition of such details, one of the early casualties of this marriage could be the essential reinforcement between independent reviews and judgements. This reinforcement is the only means to hand of manipulating the whole to exceed the sum of the parts. Communication, yes: Coordination, yes: But independence also.

As long as we are talking about quality lets talk about the quality of oversight at all levels. I have met most of the directors of state licensing agencies, and I am persuaded that they are capable professionals, but we need to make certain that these people are provided the resources and the support to do the job through the stringent times ahead. The state governing and coordinating boards, which in my experience have been reluctant to dilute their planning and coordinating functions with the administrative duties involved in oversight, may have to reevaluate the innocence of their bystanding. And our domestic institutions may have to forgo their exemptions from state oversight in order to restore the procedural teeth to licensing laws. For their part the accrediting agencies need to enlist the participation of the best representatives of their best member institutions.

In conjunction with the study of regional accreditation we did in Washington, Jim Bemis, Director of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, allowed me to sit in on one of the semiannual meetings of the Commission on Colleges, the postsecondary policy body of the Association. One of the things that impressed me was the complete lack of representation or interest in the deliberations of this body from the flagship institution of our state. Later I was dismayed by the violent reaction of the president of one of our premiere private institutions to the granting of accreditation to a nearby nontraditional institution. I say I was dismayed, because this action had become a foregone conclusion more than a year earlier to even the most disinterested observer of the agenda of the Association. We must elevate the level of interest and participation in the regional associations to the highest policy levels of our finest institutions.

In summary then, lets be careful that we have the right questions, and lets take the untidy organic mixture of oversight interests we have been willed and make the elements conspire in constructive reinforcement. There is no clean and simple solution to the quality problem.